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# AN EPISCOPAL VIEW OF HEAVEN.

BY THE REV. REGINALD HEBER HOWE.

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THE question, what Heaven is, is one with which the mind of man never ceases to engage itself. It has been so from the earliest times, it doubtless will be so to the end. The Greeks had their Elysium, where, in the words of Pindar, "The righteous dead inherit a tearless eternity." Here was the place, a plain at the end of the earth, where the air was always tempered by the zephyrs wafted in from the ocean and there was neither snow nor storm, heat nor cold. There were the asphodel meadows which none but the pure in heart, the truthful and the generous could be suffered to tread. The Egyptians had their Amenti, the hidden place into which, identified with or protected by Osiris, the righteous dead passed. The Scandinavians had their Walhalla, where fallen heroes were and where the favorite horse and armor were ever ready for use ; and

"Lo, the poor Indian, whose untutored mind  
Sees God in clouds, or hears Him in the wind,  
His soul proud science never taught to stray  
Far as the solar walk and milky way.  
Yet simple nature to his hope has given  
Behind the cloud cap't hills a humbler heaven.  
To be content's his natural desire,  
He asks no angel's wings, no seraph's fire;  
But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,  
His faithful dog shall bear him company."

Probably every man has at some time or other asked himself the question, speculated or wondered what heaven is. What may we believe with regard to it ?

Very few words will suffice to tell what the Episcopal Church has had to say on the subject. It is not one on which she has

spoken definitely or except in a very general way, and for the best of reasons. There is little definitely revealed. If we turn to the two great symbols which she has adopted as the expression of her faith, the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed, all that we shall find there are the articles: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." "He" (Jesus Christ) "ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." "I believe in the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." These in the Apostles' Creed, and in the Nicene the additional clause: "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven;" and the somewhat different phraseology of the closing sentences: "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

If we turn to the Articles of Religion we discover absolutely nothing but the single sentence in Art. IV. answering almost exactly to the language of the Creeds: "Wherewith He ascended into heaven and there sitteth until He return to judge all men at the last day."

In her Prayer Book are constant and beautiful references to Heaven. Almost the first word spoken to the worshippers when they assemble in the house of God bids them to "the throne of the heavenly grace." "So that at the last we may come to His eternal joy," ends one Form of Absolution, "and bring you to everlasting life" the other. The familiar words "Our Father, who art in heaven, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" are used again and again. "Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Thy glory," sings the *Te Deum*. "When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers." "Make them to be numbered with Thy saints in glory everlasting." "Finally after this life to attain everlasting joy and felicity." "We may rise to the life immortal." "That we may come to those unspeakable joys which Thou hast prepared for those who unfeignedly love Thee." "Or else receive him into those heavenly habitations, where the souls of those who sleep in the Lord Jesus enjoy perpetual rest and felicity."

Such are representative fragments only of prayers which the church is continually putting into the lips of her children.

Her authorized Hymnal bids us sing hymns the burden of which is much the same, only with the larger license of song, and hardly to be appealed to for accurate teaching. But this exhausts her voice on the subject. So far as she has spoken as a Church this completes her testimony as to what heaven is, and the future life of the blessed. In the main, and wisely, it is positive witness to the fact of the everlasting life, and silence as to its opposite. But from it we may derive not a little light in answer to our question what heaven is ?

Our immortality is not an immortality of the soul only, which was the belief of the ancients. "I believe in the Resurrection of the body and the Life everlasting," so says the shorter of the two Creeds.

The doctrine of the Resurrection of the body has been carried to such absurd lengths that there has not unnaturally been a reaction from belief in it in any form. But it states unquestionably a truth. Death, so far as we know anything about it, is a separation of soul and body. The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit unto God who gave it. Coming to life again, or resurrection, is their reunion. That the soul will have a tabernacle in the future life ; that this tabernacle will be such that each one's identity shall be preserved ; that it will be fitted for its new mode of being and the changed conditions of the heavenly life, this seems to be clearly taught. Indeed, as we know ourselves, a soul without a body is beyond our conception of what constitutes man. So far as we can tell, the body is necessary to the completeness of our being. "Nothing is more common," says Westcott, "than to hear it assumed that the soul is the real self. Yet nothing can be more clear, upon reflection, than that the only self of which we are conscious is made up of soul and body. The workings of these two are absolutely inseparable. We cannot contemplate the independent action of the two for an instant." Metempsychosis does not at all meet the case. "And therefore," he continues in language and in statement which cannot be improved, "I believe in the resurrection of the body. I believe, that is, that all that belongs to the essence of my person will remain through a change which the imagination cannot realize. But that of which we speak as destined to a resurrection is not that substance which we can see and handle measured by properties of sense. It represents, as far as we now see, our-

selves in our actual weakness, but essentially ourselves. We, in our whole being, this is our belief, shall rise again. And we are not these changing bodies which we bear. They alter, as we know, with every step we take and every breath we draw. We make them, if I may so speak, make them naturally, necessarily under the laws of our present existence. They are to ourselves, to use a bold figure, as the spoken word to the thought, the expression of the invisible.

‘For of the soul the body form doth take,  
For soul is form and doth the body make.’

When, therefore, the laws of our existence are hereafter modified, then we, because we are unchanged, shall find some other expression truly the ‘same’ in relation to that new order, because it is not the ‘same’ as that to which it corresponds in this.”

We cannot do better than to keep to what St. Paul teaches in regard to it under the figure which he thought best expressed it. From how many misconceptions this would have saved us. “That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain : but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him and to every seed *his own body*. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption ; it is raised in incorruption : it is sown in dishonor ; it is raised in glory : it is sown in weakness ; it is raised in power : it is sown a natural body ; it is raised a spiritual body.”

In such a tabernacle is the soul to abide forever, and so far as the form in which we are to live the everlasting life is concerned, this, as far as it lies in our power to give it, is the answer to our question.

“Or else receive him into those heavenly habitations, where the souls of those who sleep in the Lord Jesus enjoy perpetual rest and felicity.” These words give us another feature of the nature of the future life of the blessed, in regard to which there can be no doubt. It is to be one of perfect peace and happiness. And this involves certain deductions. No sin can be there. It would be an exotic in that clime. The imagery of heaven we may not be able to interpret, nor to comprehend all for which the wealth of figure used to describe it may stand, but we know that “there shall in nowise enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie.”

“Without holiness shall no man see the Lord;” it would not be happiness to him if he did. John Henry Newman has wonderfully expressed the thought in the words to the soul which he puts into the angel’s mouth in the *Dream of Gerontius*:

“And these two pains, so counter and so keen,  
The longing for Him when thou seest Him not;  
The shame of self at thought of seeing Him  
Will be thy veriest sharpest purgatory.”

And the story of Norfolk Island illustrates it. Put a man in a place he is not fit for and which is not fit for him and he would not be happy. Men make their own heaven here, and in a very true sense they will make it hereafter.

And as there will be no sin, so there will be no sorrow. The two are intimately associated here. Eliminate one and you eliminate the other. How happiness comports with knowledge of others who have not inherited heaven, if we shall have such knowledge, is a question that has always perplexed mankind. We cannot answer it. We only know that in the new heaven and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness, “God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Finally there shall be the happiness, perhaps as high as any that we know, of service. We are apt to forget this. So much has been said and written about a future of ceaseless antheming, the singing of unending psalms, “an eternity of the tabor,” as some one has slurringly and irreverently expressed it, that we think of the heavenly life as consisting in this, and the thought is unsatisfactory and repellent. But “His servants shall serve Him,” it is also told us, and we pray that our Father’s will may be done on earth as in heaven. What form this service shall take we do not know, but it agrees with every instinct of our being to believe that great gifts brought to high possibilities of effective use here, and then apparently extinguished in death, have not really perished nor accomplished all that they ever shall. They must live on, we feel, in some other sphere to do still better service for God and man.

“Somewhere, surely, afar,  
In the sounding labor house vast  
Of being, is practised that strength.”

As Matthew Arnold wrote of his father, after death, in heaven, as in the intermediate condition in Paradise, the righteous shall be in perfect happiness, for there shall be no more sin or sorrow, only the bliss of the perpetual service of God, and of dwelling forever within the beauty of His countenance.

Beyond these limits we enter the region of individual opinion and speculation, to which there is no end. Of these are born the crudest and most grotesque conceptions of the nature of the future life, as various in character as the varieties of the human mind. Every image has been pushed to its utmost, and with the fullest literalness of interpretation, and heaven has been conceived of accordingly : a veritable city, with its walls and its gates and its streets, with its trees and its river, and its sea of glass, and the nations of them that are saved walk in it.

If such conceptions help any one to think of heaven as more real, to long for it, to long to be fit to dwell in it, who shall find fault or restrain them ? Only let us remember that these are speculations in more or less degree, the forms under which revelations of the life after death are made, not the revelation itself.

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